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ABSTRACT

This is an account of the development and evaluation of a strategy to train student teachers to create communications patterns with university supervisors and supervising teachers which would help them reach their objectives. The instructional plan provided a focus on interpersonal communications skills during five weekly, one-hour seminars, which were part of the pre-fall elementary education student teaching experience at the University of Minnesota, College of Education. The guiding principle was that the instructional intervention should be derived from a statement of desired skills. Five areas were selected for this training program: (a) establishing relationships: (b) listening, i.e., attending, assessing, and clarifying; (c) interpreting and valuing in listening; (d) soliciting feedback; and (e) giving feedback. Specific behaviors and affective responses which would constitute acceptable evidences of skill performance were identified. The statements of evidence reflected the project goal of developing student teachers' skills in communicating with both their university and classroom supervisors and were of two types: (a) behavior descriptions which could be observed and checked by someone outside the dyad and (b) internal responses of the supervisor to the student teacher's communications. (The document describes the development of training strategies and evaluation of the training program. (JA)

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# A PROGRAM TO IMPROVE STUDENT TEACHER-SUPERVISOR COMMUNICATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The student teacher-supervisor relationship and the concomitant interaction are crucial factors affecting the learning outcomes of the student teaching experience. However, student teaching programs often place little, if any, emphasis on this element of the program. Furthermore, those who really have the most at stake--the student teachers--assume little responsibility for enhancing their relationships with supervisors.

This is an account of the development and evaluation of a strategy to train student teachers to create communications patterns with university supervisors and supervising teachers which would help them reach their objectives.

The instructional plan provided a focus on interpersonal communications skills during five, weekly, one-hour seminars, which were part of the pre-fall elementary education student teaching experience at the University of Minnesota, College of Education.

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATIONS

The authors began with a number of assumptions about communications and communications training. The first was that all two-or-more-person situations are interpersonal and communicative. One cannot not behave; all behavior in an interactional situation has message value--i.e., is communicative. It follows that no matter how one tries, one cannot not communicate (1). Others cannot avoid responding in some way and thus are themselves communicating.

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The second assumption was that the development of the skills associated with increasing the effectiveness of one's communication with others should not be left to chance. The lack of a systematic focus may occur because of little value being placed on the communication process and relationship-building, or because of the difficult prospect facing one who intends to identify and develop the specific skills involved.

The need to establish some degree of commonality in defining the elements of effective communications constituted the third assumption. Individuals have already done their own defining and standard-setting, and this needs to be made explicit.

Last, people can learn to communicate more effectively with each other.

The task of the authors was to set objectives, identify the skills involved in meeting those objectives, and design training strategies which would develop the skills.

## SKILL AREAS AND EVALUATION GUIDE

The guiding principle was that the instructional intervention should be derived from a statement of desired skills. Five skill areas were selected for this training program: (1) establishing relationships; (2) listening--i.e., attending, assessing, and clarifying; (3) interpreting and valuing in listening; (4) soliciting feedback; and (5) giving feedback.

Specific behaviors and affective responses which would constitute acceptable evidences of skill performance were identified. The evidence statements reflected the project goal of developing student teachers' skills in communicating with both their university and classroom supervisors and were of two types: (1) behavior descriptions which could be observed and checked by someone outside the dyad, and (2) internal responses of the supervisor to the student teacher's communications.

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The accumulation of evidences of behaviors and the assessment of the [illegible] more readily in the earlier persons are limited in number and scope. Thus, the supervisors' observations and feelings were regarded as valid criteria, as they were the intended targets for the student teachers' actions.

The skill evidences (listed under the appropriate skill area) were incorporated into an evaluation guide. (Figure 1 contains one section.) Each of the five sections of the guide had a similar format: a statement of attendance or non-attendance at the relevant seminar experience, an assessment of the over-all skill performance, and the list of specific behaviors or affective responses (of supervisor) accepted as evidences of skill performance. The evaluation for each of the three subheadings was a simple "Evidenced" or "Not Evidenced" check.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

## DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINING STRATEGIES

The authors decided early that the communications training for the student teachers should be conducted by the university supervisors so that the interaction occurring during the seminars would directly contribute to the attainment of the desired goals. The seminar experiences were structured so that supervisors would model the target skills--thus simultaneously enhancing both the teaching process and the student teacher-supervisor relationship. Therefore, the seminars were laid out in sufficient detail so that supervisors with limited or no special expertise could conduct them after a brief training session on each lesson (Sample in Figure 2).

(Insert Figure 2 here)

Specific exercises were taken from the authors' own repertoires, the array of anonymous communications training folklore, and Interpersonal

FIGURE 1
Evaluation Guide--Soliciting Feedback

| | Not Evidenced | Evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| D. Participated in seminar experiences related to soliciting feedback . . . . . | | |
| In communication with supervisors actively sought feedback about performance. | | |
| As evidence - | | |
| Stated not only that he wanted feedback, but also identified area where feedback was wanted. . . | | |
| Clarified what he heard in feedback session . . . . | | |
| Verbalized his reaction to the feedback . . . . . | | |
| Encouraged further feedback through verbal expression (which seemed sincere) of appreciation . . . . | | |
| Made supervisor feel inclined to give further feedback in future. . . . . | | |
| Made supervisor feel that feedback would receive consideration and would be used appropriately for growth. . . . . | | |

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FIGURE 2
Sample Seminar--Soliciting Feedback

Seminar 4. Soliciting Feedback.

This seminar combines and applies many of the elements of the first three meetings. The student teacher will engage in activities which are designed to increase his ability to receive accurate information about his teaching behaviors. To be effective he must be able to identify the areas where feedback is needed. He must also engage in behaviors which will encourage others to give the information which is sought in a form which can be used. These behaviors will be the focus of this seminar.

SUPERVISORS:

Sequence of activities:

1. Discussion. (20 min.)
   Begin by looking at behaviors related to soliciting feedback in the evaluation guide. Draw from the students how they see those behaviors in operation and what barriers they feel exist that might inhibit a student teacher from displaying them--e.g., fear of authority, problems with supervisor, etc.

2. Modeling the behaviors. (20 min.)
   Supervisor will model the behaviors by making soliciting statements about his supervisory behavior or about his relationship with the student teachers.

3. Practice role playing. (20 min.)
   a. Form groups of threes, A, B and C.
   b. Role play a supervisory conference or a real situation relating to student teacher's interaction.
   c. A will play role as supervisor or one from whom feedback is solicited.
   d. B will play the role of the student teacher or one who is soliciting feedback.
   e. C will be an observer looking specifically at soliciting behavior of B.

   Sequence:
   (1) B makes 2 or 3 soliciting statements and follows through.
   (2) A responds to each statement by giving feedback if appropriate.
   (3) C relates what he has observed, focusing on B's soliciting behavior.

**Rotate roles twice so all have opportunity to play all roles.**

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Communication (2).

The training for supervisors consisted of an initial run-through and discussion of each seminar with the two authors--one of whom was the supervisors' coordinator. Thus, coordinator-supervisor communications in the training sessions paralleled that of the supervisors and student teachers in the seminars.

## SEMINARS

The supervisors generally met with their students once a week for a two-hour seminar--one hour of which was allocated to the communication process (one hour per skill area). A total of 11 supervisors and 113 student teachers participated. Students received outlines of the seminar topics and copies of the evaluation guide at the beginning of the course, so that the overall goals and the specific performance criteria were explicit and public. Supervisors received detailed instructions on conducting the exercises, but were encouraged to adapt the specific procedures and content to fit the needs of their particular group.

## EVALUATION OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM

The program was set up as a trial instructional intervention, not as an experimental study. Therefore, the evaluation focus was on the general program goals and components. The data consisted of solicited and unsolicited comments on the instructional procedures, an assessment of students' performance of the desired skills, and inferences made by the authors.

### Instructional Procedures

Upon completion of the instructional program, the eleven supervisors who had used the exercises in their seminars were asked to evaluate the

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procedures built into the program. Ten supervisors responded. Of these, five considered the format and organization to be satisfactory and easy to work with; four felt the exercises were manageable, but needed some improvement; and one reported that the package was difficult to work with. Nine of the ten supervisors considered the exercises to have adequate transfer to the real world even though they may have seemed somewhat artificial. No supervisors reported that they "never felt comfortable" doing the exercises, and all of them felt that the directions were explicit enough so that they usually or always knew what to do. All reported that being walked through the exercises prior to using them was valuable, with three indicating that these sessions should have been more detailed.

No aspect of the package format was singled out for change by more than one person, although each made some comment. When asked which exercises were most and least manageable, seven identified the relationship-building seminar as the most manageable, while none of the other seminars emerged consistently in either category. Based on verbal comments from the supervisors about the exercises, the writers felt that the supervisors responded more on the basis of their preference for certain exercises than on manageability.

Behavior of Students

Supervisors used the evaluation guides to assess each student's performance. Fifty students were reported to have exhibited (at some time, at a minimal level) all of the criterion behaviors. Twenty-seven students were reported not to have exhibited one or more of the criterion behaviors. No one criterion accounted for a notable proportion of these twenty-seven students. However, a few areas tended to tally more "not evidenced" checks, and may be

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worth further investigation. Almost completely, the counter-evidences under establishing relationships consisted of "employs 'put off' responses in conversations" (with university supervisors) and "seldom or never talks about professional or personal self" (with both supervisors). The lack of talk about self could be supportive of those viewpoints which value self-disclosure as a relationship-building technique. Other areas in which some students might not have been as successful were in asking for further elaboration of the message on the emotional level before reacting to a feedback statement by the supervisor, in making the supervisor feel that the value placed on the message was separate from the value placed on the speaker, and in limiting the amount of information given in feedback to what the supervisor could use at the time. Very few people did not show the behaviors under the category of "soliciting feedback," which may relate to supervisor comments reported in the next section.

Supervisor and Student Reactions

The authors received unsolicited comments concerning the program--most of them positive--which seemed to fall into these categories: (1) the need for such a focus within the student teaching experience, (2) the training the supervisors received, (3) the detailed plans laid out for the supervisors' use, and (4) the impact on the target relationship. The chief negative feedback seemed to consist of disagreement with the high value and priority placed on the communication process between supervisors and student teachers. In addition, some supervisors reported difficulty in utilizing the evaluation guide properly.

The collage exercise in the first seminar seemed to be enthusiastically received by both students and supervisors as a valuable aid to self-disclosure

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Supervisors seemed to increase their skills, even though they were only secondary targets. Their coordinator (one of the authors) observed supervisors' increased use of the skills in staff meetings, conferences (with students and teachers), and individual interactions with him.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Time and effort needed to be devoted at the beginning of the program to dealing with the participants' feelings about the importance of interpersonal communications, so that the necessary commitment would have been obtained: from supervisors to use and stay with the instructional plan, and from students to try to develop those skills.

2. Specific attention should have been given to helping supervisors become more capable of modifying the specifics of the instructional package to fit their situations, or else skilled consultants should have been readily available to assist them.

3. There should have been a greater variety in the types of exercises used in order to increase interest and motivation.

4. The evaluation guide, although helpful, needed refinement. It lacked qualitative and quantitative dimensions which would suggest criterion levels of performance. However, the specificity of the guide was beneficial. Whatever the form, the supervisors needed more assistance in using it with their students.

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6. There seemed to be good transfer of the instructional program to the work setting. Indeed, the exercises--the types, the processes used, and the content chosen--were actually a part of the "real world" aimed for in the goals.

7. The time allocated and the scope of the intervention were adequate for the objectives set and the scope of the desired outcomes. This might not have been true if opportunities for practice of the skills had not existed outside the instructional setting (i.e., supervisors and student teachers interacted in other parts of their seminars and in school settings, as well as in the one-hour sessions devoted to communications).

8. The instructional program had beneficial side-effects on staff competencies. Future programs might set this as one of the main goals.

9. The next program, in addition to containing refined instructional techniques, should include a systematic research design to more accurately assess the impact of the program on students' and supervisors' behaviors.

NOTES

1. Watzlawick, Paul et al. Pragmatics of Human Communication (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), 1967.

2. Jung, Charles et al. Interpersonal Communications (Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory), 1971.